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Because genre theory connects writing and life, Dean’s applications provide detailed suggestions for class projects—such as examining want ads, reading fairy tales, and critiquing introductions—that build on students’ lived experience with genres. These wide-ranging activities can be modified for a broad variety of grade levels and student interests.

Deborah Dean is associate professor of English education at Brigham Young University, where she teaches undergraduate courses in the teaching of writing and grammar, language arts teaching methods for secondary schools, and first-year and advanced writing classes. She previously taught junior high and high school in Washington and is the author of Strategic Writing: The Writing Process and Beyond in the Secondary English Classroom.

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II  Practice

Once students learn what it is to engage deeply and write well in any particular circumstance, they have a sense of the possibilities of literate participation in any discursive arena.

Charles Bazerman, “The Life of Genre, the Life in the Classroom”
4 Teaching Genre Concepts

DISCOVERING GENRES

Even if we can't develop the full contextual aspect of some genres because of the restrictions of the classroom situation, it is helpful for students to know that not all writing is the same. They can learn the concept of genres. To begin, it is important for them to know that “studying genre is studying how people use language to make their way in the world” (Devitt, Writing 9). By exploring their own uses of language and texts, students can see those uses in social interactions that constitute genres.

- Begin this exploration by first helping students understand that not all writing is the same. Ask them to list what kinds of writing they feel they do well and what kinds they don’t feel they do well. Discuss these lists in class. Such conversation allows us to acknowledge that we all write for different purposes and that all of us are good at some kinds of writing—and that all of us, including teachers, have kinds of writing that challenge us.

- Cooper writes that genres “emerge from social interactions and the need to communicate” (25). Students should also understand this social aspect of genres. Have them generate a list, over several days, of the ways they use written language to accomplish different tasks. They need to consider all writing, not just school writing and not just writing on paper—they write on phones, on keyboards, with chalk or markers, even with their fingers (messages in the steam on a car window). After they have developed their lists, go over them as a class and create a master list. Encourage students to think of any more ways they use writing that they may have failed to list individually but that come to mind as they hear others’ suggestions.

- Have students break into small groups to discuss the master list and decide if any of the ways of writing are the same type, or genre, by using questions like these: What purposes do the different kinds of writing serve? Are any social contexts similar? If some seem to be the same “kind” of writing, have students group those together and discuss why they belong together. Devitt explains that David Russell “takes as a given that participants’ recognition of a genre is what rightly determines whether one genre is distinct from another” (Writing 8). If what Russell says and Devitt endorses is true, then our students’ sense of purpose and
boundaries is valid. There really aren’t right and wrong responses here so much as an exploration of what constitutes genre. So, students should, for example, consider in discussion if email and text messaging are different genres or not. If they are different, what makes them so? If they are not, how are they alike—what social purposes do they both serve? How are their situations similar? Does the technology matter (that is, can notes on paper be the same genre as a text message)?

- Since, as I’ve mentioned, “studying genre is studying how people use language to make their way in the world” (Devitt, Writing 9), students should examine the language of some genres they use. How does the language of specific genres fit their purpose and social context? If, for example, they decided that email messages to teachers or to businesses are the same genre as email messages to friends, what language differences might students find among them? Is that enough difference to say they are different genres? Why or why not?

- Further discussion could develop ideas about genres of business and genres of power. How do these differ from genres students use with friends or in casual situations? What are the consequences of responding inappropriately to the situation of a genre: in other words, if a student uses the language of a text message in a letter of application for a job, what are the potential consequences? Is the choice worth the potential problems? Have students discuss these issues as a way to clarify what genres are and what they mean to them in their daily lives.

- As a way to articulate the conclusions from the discussion and promote individual learning, end by having students write reflections about their personal definitions of each genre and how a knowledge of genre can be important.

BUILDING GENRE AWARENESS

An application that focuses on awareness more than acquisition is one way to address genre theory in the classroom. In early writing on post-process theory, Petraglia, agreeing with recommendations from Roderick Hart and Don Burks, urges the development of “sensitivity to the rhetorical possibilities available” (62): “not to improve students’ writing skills but to make students informed consumers of written discourse in the hope that they may become better producers of it as well” (63). Because it begins with the idea that there is no one right way to write, an awareness approach helps students learn to adjust language to situation.
Chapter 4: Teaching Genre Concepts

An awareness approach leans more to the genre as practice end of the continuum because it focuses less on genres themselves and more on what genres mean, how they respond to context, and how they represent ways of viewing and valuing the world. Devitt explains that an awareness approach teaches writers how to consider new genres, because it gives them strategies for and practice with examining samples of genres and then knowing “how to interpret what they find, especially discerning the required from the optional elements and the rhetorical nature of the genre, to understand its context and functions for its users, in order to avoid formulaic copying of a model” (*Writing* 201).

The following application is based on ideas from *Scenes of Writing* by Devitt, Reiff, and Bawarshi (93–94).

- Choose a genre to use for class investigation and have students explore its context, or what Devitt and her colleagues call the scene and situation. The authors use the terms *scene* to correspond to the larger context and *situation* to refer to the immediate context of a genre. For example, if our class were going to investigate the genre of want ads to sell cars, the scene could include a newspaper, a website, or booklets found outside fast-food entrances. In each of these scenes, students should identify the sort of place the scene is, the types of activities that take place there, the people who engage in those activities, and the shared objectives of those people. Overall, students should seek to answer these questions: In what ways do people in these scenes use the genre—and what are the reasons or purposes for the genre? It might be necessary for teachers to encourage students to go beyond the obvious; in my example, the obvious purpose of the genre is to sell and/or buy a used car. However, there are other purposes for people who use this genre: to save money or recoup it, to eliminate unnecessary expenses, to do a favor for a relative. Students need to think beyond the surface.

- Next, have students investigate the situation within the scene. To simplify the want ad example for class instruction, for instance, I might examine only one situation within the broader scene—the situation of a newspaper want ad to sell a car. Within that situation, students should determine, as much as possible, the interactions of the participants and the roles each is expected to play. So, for example, the person who places the ad has something she expects someone else wants, while the person responding to the ad is in need of something another has. This creates an unequal relationship in some regards—unless the seller is desperate and the buyer is “just looking.” In that case, the relationship shifts. Determining motives and relationships from the ads alone, however, may
be difficult. But students should consider that those who would look for
cars in newspaper want ad sections might be different customers than
those who would look online or at postings on a grocery store’s bulletin
board. As you explore one situation, help students realize how the other
situations would possibly engender different characteristics. For instance,
someone reading the booklet while he eats at the fast-food restaurant may
simply be passing the time, interested but not really ready to buy—a fairly
unengaged participant in the scene. Students’ explorations of these situ-
ations and the spaces they make for participants to act in should help
them understand the nature of genres more thoroughly.

Next, have students examine and analyze several examples of
the genre. If a genre is short, students can examine a larger number (an
encouragement to select a short genre for this exploration), such as all of
the used car ads in the Sunday newspaper. Have them look for patterns
of features and consider the following aspects suggested by Devitt, Reiff,
and Bawarshi:

- Content: What ideas does this genre include? What does it leave
  out?
- Structure: How are the ideas organized in the genre? How does
  the organization privilege certain ideas over others?
- Format: How is the genre formatted? What visual elements (font
  size and white space, for example) seem to be expected?
- Language: What kind of language is used? What level of formal-
  ity is found in word choice? What tone is used?
- Sentences: What kinds of sentences are usual? Short or long? Di-
  rect or winding? (94)

If students have a wide range of samples to explore, they should notice
variety in most of these areas, although some more structured genres have
less flexibility in what they allow. However, most genres allow for some
variety, and students should see this.

After students have a good understanding of the genre, have
them connect the patterns they found with the situation(s) the genre
responds to. To do this, students should think of why the patterns they
observed exist in this genre. Have them use questions like the following
to come to conclusions about how genres work in specific situations:

- What roles do the patterns suggest for participants?
- What attitudes are represented by the patterns of the genre?
- What actions do the patterns allow and constrain?
- What values are represented by the genre and its patterns?
Chapter 4: Teaching Genre Concepts

By considering these questions and thus connecting patterns in the texts to the participants and situations, students become more aware of how genres function in social settings—and become more aware of aspects of genres, such as their variability and contextual nature. From this awareness, students become more sensitive to the ways genres act in their lives and the ways they act with genres.

Devitt suggests that teachers begin teaching genre awareness to young students with language explorations that help them see “how language differs in different situations and how those differences relate to different purposes” (Writing 198). Gregory Shafer explains how he used letters to different audiences to help his (mostly immigrant) students gain the beginning of genre awareness. As his students wrote letters to friends and to potential employers, they discussed the implications of language choice and how it was connected to power relationships between the writer and the reader of the letters. Although Shafer never mentions genre theory, his lessons develop genre awareness in his students as they gain a sense of how good writing adapts to situation—considering purposes and audiences, settings and relationships.

UNDERSTANDING GENRE AS READER EXPECTATION

Genres don’t only give ideas of how to act in certain situations; they also give us clues as to how to read certain situations. Bomer’s example of a program handed to him in a theater, described in Chapter 1, shows how situation is inherent to genre. But Freadman notes that the relation of formal properties of text with context “does not mean . . . that the formal properties of a genre cannot travel” (“Anyone” in Reid 117). Genres can be, and often are, engaged for purposes beyond those intended in their original situation. This flexibility inherent in genre is an important concept for students to understand as they develop as writers: it means they have choices as writers, but it also means they have responsibilities to readers and to situations.

Students can begin to understand how genre establishes reader expectation by examining the book Dragonology: The Complete Book of Dragons by Dugald A. Steer (writing as Ernest Drake). By questioning the genres used to present the fake facts in Dragonology—charts, graphs, timelines, etc—students can appreciate how genres carry expectations (of truthfulness? of factuality? of pretense?) beyond the content of each piece. They can see that we approach genres with reader expectations because past experiences and current situations prepare us to do so. Therefore,
writers know that they can count on readers to have a beginning stance toward their texts because of genre. To help students understand this aspect of genre, I use a book by Robert N. Munsch, *The Paper Bag Princess*.

- Ask students to look at the cover and the title and anticipate what kind of a story this will be. “A fairy tale!” is always the answer I get because the cover shows a picture of a dragon and the title names a princess . . . so students use the frame of reference they have that puts the two together.

- Then, ask them to name the characteristics they expect as readers of a fairy tale. As they state their expectations, list them on the board. Usually I get at least the following: a handsome prince; magic; some problem that has to be overcome, usually by magic; a castle; a prince who saves the princess; love; a happily-ever-after ending.

- Next, read the story to the students. Tell them to watch for the ways the story meets their expectations and ways it doesn’t. As the story starts, it seems that it will be what they expect, but very quickly students see Elizabeth, the princess, confronting the dragon to save the prince. And she manages to thwart the dragon through brains rather than brawn. The ending, though, is the most surprising: when Prince Ronald fails to appreciate Elizabeth’s actions to rescue him because he objects to her appearance, she responds: “Ronald, your clothes are really pretty and your hair is very neat. You look like a real prince, but you are a bum.” The two don’t get married, reversing the expected ending for a fairy tale.

- After you’ve finished reading the story—and the students have had their chuckle over the ending—ask them to identify ways the story meets their expectations of a fairy tale. My students usually note that it has a prince, a princess, a dragon, a castle, magic, and a problem. Then, ask how it does not meet their expectations. Obviously: the ending, but also the role reversal (the princess saving the prince) and the brain/brawn reversal. Ask them if it is still a fairy tale. I’ve never had students say that it isn’t, so I ask: Why is it still a fairy tale if it doesn’t meet all your expectations? Students quickly come to see that the genre has flexibility, that enough aspects of their expectations have been met so as to satisfy them that what they expected was what they got. The little twists are creative, not genre breaking.

- Next, ask them to speculate how far a writer could twist a fairy tale until it is no longer a fairy tale. At what point would we feel misled—thinking we were getting one thing but getting another? This is interesting for students to consider. They often find that the boundaries are
very flexible, but twisting enough of them gives them a new genre, a fable or a fantasy or something else. At this point it can be helpful to bring in some other stories that stretch the boundaries of readers’ expectations and test their conclusions. An Undone Fairy Tale by Ian Lendler is one possibility. In that book, the author and illustrator interrupt the story to talk to the reader, giving instructions about how to read the story. The result is comical. Is it still a fairy tale or is the author using readers’ expectations of a fairy tale to do something else?

Finally, ask students to consider how they might read The Paper Bag Princess if they didn’t have any exposure to fairy tales and, therefore, no reader expectations for the genre. What would be different? Most students are able to see that the humor of the story, the ending, and some of the twists that add interest for them as readers would not be as meaningful without the established expectations.

It is important at this point to discuss how genre knowledge can affect all our reading: if we pick up a text and don’t know what to expect from it, will we understand it in the same way that readers who are familiar with the context and the genre do? Will we know the “road signs” to look for to make the most effective meaning of the text? I tell students of the first time I’ve read certain documents—my first teaching contract, directions for applying for a rebate, tenure files—and how in each case the reading challenged me initially because I had to make sense of the genre first: what its role was in the situation, who wrote it, what that person wanted to accomplish, what my role was as a reader, and what aspects of the text mattered most for the purpose and situation.

Cooper writes that “knowledge of genres is essential to reading and writing, making reading comprehensible and writing possible” (25). Is this statement true or not? How do reading strategies differ when we know a genre and when we do not? Have students write responses to this quote and these questions and discuss them to refine their understanding of the role of genre in their own reading experience.

In Scenes of Writing: Strategies for Composing with Genres, the authors include an activity that relates to the concept of this lesson. They ask students to “list at least 10 different genres you read, including if possible at least one genre that you read on a computer. Remember to include not just formal or school genres, and not just literary genres but also the everyday genres you read, like the backs of cereal boxes. Then pick three of these genres and write a paragraph describing how differently you read each of them” (Devitt, Reiff, and Bawarshi 50).
Part 2: Practice

Have students complete this activity to individualize the idea of reading with genre knowledge and to reflect on how they already use such knowledge in their own reading lives. The reflection should help them consider even further how they can apply genre knowledge to future reading experiences.

BLURRING GENRE BOUNDARIES

To see that genres have flexibility, students can explore a variety of examples of a genre they already know to discover the range that a genre can take. One genre that I have found interesting for this exploration is what I call how-to writing and others sometimes call process writing. Most students are familiar with this kind of writing, and an abundance of examples is available. Teachers can follow the ideas of this application with a number of genres, as long as a wide assortment of examples is available. (A slightly different version of this application is found in my book Strategic Writing: The Writing Process and Beyond in the Secondary English Classroom.)

- Begin by collecting samples of how-to writing: furniture or bicycle assembly instructions, game instructions, directions to get from one place to another—or try mining www.ehow.com for directions on just about everything. I also include humorous versions of how-to writing that show the blurring of boundaries. Online I found “Cat Bathing as a Martial Art” by Howard “Bud” Herron (available at http://www.tlcpoodles.com/catbath.html). I also use “Slice of Life” by Russell Baker, a humorous commentary on slicing a turkey written in a how-to format. Finally, I try to make sure I have some versions of how-to writing that use the form to describe what not to do. A simple version is How to Lose All Your Friends by Nancy Carlson, but another is “How to Write a Really Bad Essay” by J. Gladman (available at http://www.durham.edu.on.ca/grassroots/oxfordtutor/badessay.html). Some satirical examples of how-to writing include William Safire’s “How to Read a Column” (a challenging example for students to grasp but important to show how context matters). Another example, and one that also moves into the realm of social commentary is “Game Ball: How to Shamelessly Use Your Child to Get an Autographed Baseball” by Frank Lalli.

- With a wide variety of examples at hand, begin by asking students what they know about the context for how-to writing (or whatever type of writing you’re showing). Who writes these texts? Who reads
them? Why? In what context and situation do they expect to find this kind of writing? Why?

- After they’ve discussed the context, have students generate a list of characteristics for the genre. For each characteristic, ask them to consider why that characteristic would be expected for the purpose and context of the genre. At this point, it is important to have students explore the more traditional examples you’ve collected. Students can generate more ideas and see if their expectations for the genre are confirmed.

- The next step is valuable for students to begin to see the blurring of boundaries. Let them examine the less traditional examples and find ways that those examples meet the expectations and ways they don’t. As students examine the samples used for other purposes (humor or social commentary), discuss their contexts. Are they the same? Are the pieces of writing really trying to do the same thing—or are they doing something else? What students may find is that using the expectations for one purpose and context in another context and for alternate purposes blurs the lines of genre as a social response. Aspects of the form stay much the same: in how-to writing, these formal aspects might include the use of imperatives, the numbered list, the explanations that elaborate the directions. But the content shifts to accommodate the new purpose/situation. Language shifts to create a different tone, a different relationship between the reader and the writer. Ask students to consider and discuss why the characteristics of one genre can accomplish other purposes in other contexts.

- Next, ask students to consider other examples they know of genre boundaries being blurred, of genres being used in ways other than in the contexts and for the purposes they originally were designed. For examples, students might look at memoirs or novels that are written as a series of poems (Learning to Swim: A Memoir by Ann Turner, Make Lemonade by Virginia Euwer Wolff, Out of the Dust and Witness by Karen Hesse) and explore why authors would choose to blur the boundaries that way. Are the books poems or novels? Older students might find it interesting to consider nonfiction books that read more like novels: Seabiscuit by Laura Hillenbrand and The Devil in the White City: Murder, Magic, and Madness at the Fair That Changed America by Erik Larson, for example. Again, why the blurring of boundaries? What does that tell us about the genres? About contexts? About purposes? Kress says: “I expect genres to occur in a certain place, and when they appear out of their place I wonder what is going on. ‘Lifting’ a genre from one context and putting it in
another . . . is an innovative act, an act of creativity. It changes not just the genre, not just my relation to the text, but the new context in which it occurs” (“Genre and the Changing” 467). Have students discuss Kress’s statement and their experiences with blurring or lifted genres.

- Finally, have students reflect on the ways blurred boundaries can be acts of creativity, of rebellion even. Devitt comments on the increased use of personal letters that are really sales pitches. “Such attempts to use form to mislead us about the actual genre again indicate the separability of formal features from the essence of a genre” (Writing 12). Have students think about the manipulative aspects of blurred boundaries. In reflections, have them consider possible positive and negative consequences to using blurred genre boundaries in their own lives.
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